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# The Matter of Myrrhine for Louis

Dale Davis

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## The Matter of Myrrhine for Louis · *Dale Davis*

THE SPECIFICS as the scenario opens are hazy; the music to accompany the opening scene would be danceable, but not specific enough to indicate waltz, tango, or foxtrot even. In the beginning there was a manuscript attributed to H.D. entitled "Classical Fragments" at the Beinecke. In the beginning there was a publisher who visited the Beinecke in search of a manuscript by H.D. The publisher had two requirements: first, that the length of the manuscript be limited, to allow the use of paper whose quality would be worthy of H.D.'s work; second, that the manuscript allow innovation in typography and design. The publisher wished to marry a manuscript with typography and design in a manner which would state itself as why.

The publisher's first choice was H.D.'s "Notes on Euripides, Pausanias and Greek Lyric Poets," a manuscript whose length was expensively prohibitive. The publisher's planned methods of distribution would not have enabled that manuscript to receive the attention she thought absolutely essential to it.

Among H.D.'s many unpublished manuscripts was "Classical Fragments," two typed pages containing ten short poems. Of all the poems in the manuscript, the poem which said yes, yes, yes, to the publisher was "Dialogue":

- A. O my sister, the lamp of my joy is quenched in a black pool of sadness. Comfort me.
- B. O my sister, shall I speak to you of the strange loves of Leda among the curled hyacinths?
- A. The yearning for wild love pours deeper sorrow upon me.
- B. Shall I speak of Achilles, the young fleet-foot slayer of Hector?
- A. O my sister, one death awaits slain and slayer.
- B. But the tall Minyae brought back gold and a fair woman.
- A. And Medea was the slayer of her own children.
- B. O my sister, Helen was beautiful—
- A. The ruins of Troy are a witness.

The last two lines of the poem, which seemed to the publisher a separate poem, were added in a handwriting which did not resemble H.D.'s.

The title intrigued, as the poems were both classical and fragmented. Classical in style, they were fragments of an identity rising in and out of the poems, but never clearly manifested as complete. It was the fragmented identity of the manuscript as a voice which appealed to the publisher, how to use typography and design to heighten that very voice.

In the beginning there was a manuscript and there was a publisher.

The second step involved obtaining permission to have the manuscript photocopied, and the third step obtaining permission to publish the manuscript in a limited edition. The publisher wrote to James Laughlin to obtain permission to have the manuscript photocopied, and once that permission had been obtained and the photocopy received from the Beinecke, the publisher retyped the manuscript, both for distancing the work and to feel the poems come together letter by letter, word by word on the typewriter, and sent the original of her typed copy to James Laughlin with a request for permission to publish.

The music to accompany this part of the scenario would not be danceable in a recognizable form. The publisher kept no copies of her correspondence. She did, however, make a carbon of the typed copy of the manuscript mailed to James Laughlin.

The publisher does have, however, three letters relating to this manuscript. The first is a letter to the publisher from James Laughlin, dated August 1, 1984. The letter states:

I'm sure you've been into this, but I had never put together that H.D. and Aldington were translating (or creating) the same poems.

1. Who were they translating? It's certainly not Sappho. I checked that out. I can't pin it down in any of my books.
2. Who did them first? Maybe Louis Silverstein knows.

There is no attribution in Aldington.

Included with the letter were four photocopies: "The Offering to Persephone," "Idyll," "Konallis to Myrrhine," and "Myrrhine to Konallis." "From Richard Aldington's *The Love of Myrrhine and Konallis* (New York: Pascal Covici, 1926)" was handwritten on "The Offering to Persephone."

The second letter is a photocopy of a letter from Adalaide Morris to James Laughlin dated Tuesday, 14 August. Laughlin sent the photocopy of Morris' letter to him to the publisher. The letter indicates that she

checked Aldington bibliographies and found nothing “under the rubric ‘translation’ but under ‘poets’ or ‘poetry’ ” found *The Love of Myrrhine and Konallis* listed.

The third letter is a photocopy of a letter from Perdita Schaffner to James Laughlin dated August 20, 1984. Perdita Schaffner indicates in her first sentence she is responding to a letter received from Laughlin dated August 1st. In relation to the publisher’s proposed project of publishing “Classical Fragments,” she wrote, “I do approve of her project. By all means set and draw up with Peggy.”

The music at this point in the scenario would be a waltz to indicate something definite has occurred though it bears no relation to any plot, rather like the dinner or luncheon scene where the meal is presented in detail, and consumed, and the characters involved get up from the table to resume their ways.

At this point, without the benefit of the publisher’s side of the correspondence, it may be concluded that James Laughlin pointed out to Dale Davis that the ten poems entitled “Classical Fragments” which she located as an unpublished manuscript by H.D. at the Beinecke and wrote to him for permission to photocopy and for permission to publish were contained in *The Love of Myrrhine and Konallis* by Richard Aldington.

The scenario shifts at this point from a publisher in pursuit of “Classical Fragments” as a manuscript she wished to publish to a search for the origins of the mysterious Myrrhine. The first step taken was a textual comparison of two of the poems in the H.D. attributed manuscript with the same two poems as published in Richard Aldington’s *The Love of Myrrhine and Konallis*: “Myrrhine to Konallis” and “Konallis to Myrrhine.” The textual comparison, using the photocopies supplied by James Laughlin, reveals word for word, comma for comma, hyphen for hyphen, semi-colon for semi-colon, the two texts were exactly the same. The differences, in each poem, were Aldington’s capitalization for one word in each poem and his line breaks.

Having done the brief textual comparison, the publisher’s next step was a trip to The Poetry/Rare Books Collection, SUNY Buffalo for a look at Richard Aldington’s *The Love of Myrrhine and Konallis* in its entirety and to have photocopies made of the Aldington book. The publisher was investing more than her time in the mystery.

*The Love of Myrrhine and Konallis and other prose poems* by Richard Al-

dington, with End Sheet and Wrapper Design by Frank Meschou, was published by Pascal Covici (Chicago) in 1926. The edition consisted of one thousand and ten copies "of which five hundred are for England and five hundred and ten for America. The first one hundred and fifty copies are autographed by the author." The Buffalo copy was number 213. The only deviation from what has been presented here so far is that Laughlin had written on the photocopy, "Pascal Covici, New York, 1926."

Aldington's book is in two sections: "The Love of Myrrhine and Konallis" and "Nineteen Prose Poems." The last page of the first section, page 64, contains the poem "Epitaph" which is followed by the dates "1914-1916." The book, itself a splendid example of book design as a period piece, is 112 pages.

The word "translation" is nowhere to be found in Aldington's book.

Since the publisher was in Buffalo she took advantage of the opportunity to check through the Robert Graves material there. Mary Barnard, in response to an inquiry from the publisher on another matter, also responded to her query on the matter of Myrrhine in a letter to her dated October 5, 1984.

About H.D.: I'm intrigued by the fragments you quote. I tried to look up Myrrhine and Konallis, but found nothing except an allusion to the Myrrhine who was an Amazon. Is it your understanding that these are translations? Or imitations of translations from the Greek? If they are translations, have you considered the possibility that H.D. and Aldington collaborated on them? If they had done so, he would have considered that they were enough his for him to use them in a book of his own. I can't remember that I ever heard of two poets collaborating on lyric poems, but collaboration on translation is not unusual. I can't remember any reference to Diodorus Siculus in Pound's writing, including his letters to me (unpublished). Diodorus Siculus is Robert Graves' man. I'm hazy about a possible association between Aldington and Graves. Maybe Graves put Aldington onto D. S. Graves and Pound, of course, never had any use for each other. The fact that Graves mentioned D. S. would probably be enough to put Pound off him for good.

Robert Graves' 1964 book *Man Does, Woman Is* (Doubleday) contains the poem "Myrrhina":

O, why judge Myrrhina  
As though she were a man?  
She obeys a dark wisdom  
(As Eve did before her)  
Which never can fail,  
Being bound by no pride  
Of armorial bearings  
Bequeathed in tail male.

And though your blood brother  
Who dared to do you wrong  
In his greed of Myrrhina  
Might plead a like wisdom  
The fault to excuse,  
Myrrhina is just:  
She has hanged the poor rogue  
By the neck from her noose.

This brief sidestep to Robert Graves via Mary Barnard came about when the publisher in her search for Myrrhine located “Myrine” in Graves’ *The Greek Myths*. When there seems to be nothing, one goes where the breeze blows, “Myrrhine,” “Myrine,” to see what the wind is like there.

Graves’ source for “Myrine” in *The Greek Myths* is Diodorus Siculus (Book III). Diodorus Siculus (1st century B.C.) came from Agyrium in Sicily. He wrote the general history of the world from mythical times to Caesar’s Gallic Wars (54 B.C.) and entitled his work *The Library*. *The Library* is a rich mine of otherwise unavailable sources. Myrine is a part of Book III.

In Graves’ summation/adaptation of Diodorus Siculus, Myrine was of the Libyan Amazons, an Amazonian queen, a military commander, a warrior. She was paid divine honor, she conquered cities and founded cities, including the city of Myrine, crossed most of Libya, entered Egypt with an army. Myrine subdued several Aegean Islands, including Lesbos where she built the city of Mitylene named after a sister who shared the campaign with her. She was killed in battle, and the Amazon army, defeated, retired to Libya.

It could be speculated that Robert Graves’ poem “Myrrhina” nods to

the “Myrine” of his *The Greek Myths*, but this is not a study of Robert Graves as a writer or of Graves’ summation and adaptation of Diodorus Siculus and the way in which *The Library* worked its way into *The Greek Myths*. The question forming in the publisher’s mind at this point was one of the country of language and mythology, a country with a language where words are carefully selected origins.

The music at this point in the scenario consists of three texts being read aloud simultaneously: the ten poems from the manuscript “Classical Fragments,” Robert Graves’ “Myrrhina,” and Diodorus Siculus, Book III (51.3 through 57.3). “Classical Fragments” and “Myrrhina” continue to be read until the finish of the reading of Diodorus Siculus. The reading of all three texts should end exactly together, and the ending should be abrupt, followed by several measures of silence to indicate the whereabouts of the scenario at this point.

Since this scenario has yet to find a form for itself, all doors are open doors. When Paul Zimmer was a guest at The Writers’ Forum, SUNY Brockport, his reading was followed by a gathering at William Heyen’s home. The date is not firmly fixed in the publisher’s mind, though she does remember it was the evening of the first Ferraro-Bush debate on television. The gathering at William Heyen’s home included, in addition to Paul Zimmer and the publisher, Hennie Heyen, Carol Cloos, Judith Kitchen, and Stanley Lindberg. Any gathering in William Heyen’s home also includes books, books, and books, and broadsides, and chapbooks, and more books. Bill brought out boxes of recent acquisitions and asked the publisher if she would like to select a book for her own collection. Yes, was immediate, and then which one. The problem seemed to resolve itself as among all the new books there was one old book, a smallish book. The publisher picked up the book with no reason other than this was the book she wanted. Now holding her book in her hands the publisher learned her selection was *Others Abide* by Humbert Wolfe. Opening the book the publisher learned the title was from Matthew Arnold, “Others abide our question.” The book was a first edition of Humbert Wolfe’s translations from *The Greek Anthology* (1928). It contained two poems by Myrinus in Wolfe’s translation, “Kings In Green Arcady” and “Love and Thrysis.”

Wolfe writes that his translations “are in the order of the Loeb Edition of the Greek Anthology (Heinemann),” and that he checked his own versions “by having resource to authorized translations, notably those of

Paton and Mackail." The two poems by Myrinus, as translated by Humbert Wolfe, bear no subject matter resemblance to the poems in Richard Aldington's *The Love of Myrrhine and Konallis*. What the publisher did gain was an addition to her collection of English translations of *The Greek Anthology* (which Bill Heyen bought at the Strand for \$8.00), one lovely evening, and a push to reread the photocopies of Aldington's book which she had obtained from the edition at The Poetry/Rare Books Collection.

Aldington's "Idyll" (not contained in "Classical Fragments") begins:

I, Konallis, am but a goat-girl dwelling  
on the violet hills of Korinthos.

In Graves' summation/adaptation of Diodorus Siculus, the Libyan Amazons inhabit Herpera, "an island in Lake Tritonis which was so rich in fruit-bearing trees, sheep and goats, that they found no need to grow corn." The publisher realized what she was in need of was a good map, a reference work of the type in H.D.'s library at the Beinecke, Ernest Rhys' *Atlas of Ancient and Classical Geography*.

In "Konallis to Myrrhine" Myrrhine is tied to Mytilene:

It is said that Zeus gave wealth to the  
Rhodians and the gift of the Muses  
to the gold-tettinx-bearing dwellers  
at Athens; but his fairest gift was  
to Mytilene when he sent Myrrhine  
thither in a swallow-wing-sailed  
barque of the Kaunians.

Mytilene, Mitylene, Myrrhine, Myrine, the wind is it ever dependable, or should one ask more of it than to be carried open to destination.

And somehow there was *The Little Review*. When in need of the wind of the times, there is Margaret Anderson and *The Little Review*. The March 1917 issue of *The Little Review* contains two prose poems by Richard Aldington: "Thanatos" and "Hermes-of-the-Dead." Textually both poems as they appear in *The Little Review* are quite close to the poems as they appear in *The Love of Myrrhine and Konallis*; the difference, in both cases, is in form. "Thanatos" and "Hermes-of-the-Dead" in *The Little Re-*



view appear in the long line form of the prose poem, while in *The Love of Myrrhine and Konallis* the form resembles the short line form common to the English translations of *The Greek Anthology*. The difference would appear to be in the reading, the long line of words sweeping the ideas, thereby relaxing the intensity, as opposed to the brief stop at the end of the short line, enabling the poem to be read line intensifying line. Neither "Thanatos" nor "Hermes-of-the-Dead" appears in "Classical Fragments," nor does an acknowledgement of *The Little Review* appear in *The Love of Myrrhine and Konallis*.

Norman T. Gates in *The Poetry of Richard Aldington: A Critical Evaluation and An Anthology of Uncollected Poems* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1974) thoroughly discusses the publication of *The Love of Myrrhine and Konallis*, including *The Love Poems of Myrrhine and Konallis, A Cycle of Prose Poems Written After The Greek Manner* (Cleveland: The Clerk's Press, 1917). H.D. does not enter the discussion.

Forty copies of The Clerk's Press book were printed on Tuscany hand-made paper, typography and press work by Charles C. Bubbs. The foreword to the edition states the poems "are frankly imitations of the epigrams found in *The Anthology*."

Another trip to the Beinecke led to Louis Silverstein's handing the publisher copy Number 38 of Richard Aldington's *The Love Poems of Myrrhine and Konallis, A Cycle of Prose Poems Written After The Greek Manner*. Richard Aldington inscribed copy Number 38 to H.D. with "For 'the younger sister of Konallis' from R.A." *The Little Review* was acknowledged in The Clerk's Press book.

The same trip to the Beinecke led the publisher to *The Dearest Friend: A Selection from the Letters of Richard Aldington to John Courmos* (Francestown, New Hampshire: Typographeum, 1978). In a letter dated 14/2/17 Aldington writes:

You & H.D. should sit down one evening with Images, the 3 anthologies & all my m.s.s. & stuff published in mags & c. I believe you could make up something as large or larger than Images, especially if you made two sections of prose poems, one containing the Middle Ages & similar stuff & the other containing the best & least hectic of those pseudo Hellenic fantasies I have fastened upon Myrrhine & Konallis! Bubbs is making one of his booklets from the latter so you can

see who looks best in print. I have really a lot of stuff of one sort or another wh. could be organized into a book—call it “Despairs & Reveries,” or something like that. Perhaps just “Reveries.” All the poems of one sort fall under the first heading & the Greek ones under the latter. But no doubt you and H.D. can make up something better.

In the beginning there was a publisher who visited the Beinecke in search of a manuscript by H.D. to publish. The publisher selected the Greek  $\Sigma$  (Sigma) to name her press,  $\Sigma$  the equivalent of the imaginative putting together of this and that. The music to accompany the conclusion of the scenario would be played upon a single cello with a few notes open to be continued in the air.